

Ronald J. Cobble

The Honorable Madeline Hughes Haikala  
United States District Court  
Hugo L. Black U.S. Courthouse  
1729 Fifth Avenue North  
Birmingham, AL 35203

Dear Judge Haikala:

As a concerned citizen and parent of two children who are directly impacted by the consent order submitted by Huntsville City Schools in response to case number 5:-63-cv-00190-MHH. I am writing your Honor to address several points of contention with respect to the consent order that will be heard in your courtroom March 11, 2015.

As a life-long resident of Huntsville, graduate of the Huntsville City School System, hereinafter referred to as HCS, and parent of four children, two graduates and two presently enrolled, I and many others have grown tired of the politics and statistical half truths that continue to perpetuate the operation of a less than equitable system. We agree with your opinion issued in 2014 and the Department of Justice, hereinafter referred to as DOJ, arguments that racial inequities have increased over the years. The worry for citizens and children of all colors is "what will happen if HCS is released from the desegregation suit and becomes no longer accountable to the courts.

My first point of contention is with the Student Assignment Plan, hereinafter referred to as SAP, proposed in this consent order. All of the redrawn boundaries have been gerrymandered in such a way to be consistent with a "education ideal" to keep children with their classmates from elementary to high school. From my reading, there exists no scholarly research, to my knowledge, that this approach is beneficial. Over fifty years of research continues to validate that social and economic diversity is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student's social background. (2012 Kahlenburg).

I submit that HCS considers operations and logistics a priority over diversity when making decisions that affect feeder patterns. The proposed homogeneous SAP does very little in terms of racial or socioeconomic diversity, while implementing a neatly arranged feeder pattern from elementary to middle and the high school level. In 2013, parents learned that Dr. Wardynski

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intended to merge the middle schools with the elementary schools creating a Pre-K - 8th, and 9th - 12th model, eventually closing or consolidating eight middle schools across the district. The structure of a split school feeding pattern does not fit the new operational model. The announcement came from Dr. Wardynski's director of operations, not the directors of curriculum and instruction. This is a clear indication that economics and operations take precedence over education. The planning that had culminated in the first proposed SAP may have begun as early as 2009 with the closure of Stone Middle School. In the fall of 2014, the closure of Ed White Middle School eliminated a second middle school where a split zone feeder pattern and socioeconomic integration existed. After the court's rejection of the initial SAP, the mediated SAP will eliminate the final instance of a middle school feeding two high schools and socioeconomic integration by reassigning ALL students entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade from Whitesburg P-8 to Grissom High School, hereinafter referred to as GHS.

The proposed SAP fits Dr. Wardynski's operational model nicely. The consolidation of existing middle and elementary schools such as Challenger, Hampton Cove and Williams will be administrative, like the changes made at Mt. Gap, The Chapman Schools, and Whitesburg. The only issue between realizations of the model is one of brick and mortar. HCS is now positioned to build a new Morris P-8 that will close Westlawn. There is a good probability that we will see a Blossomwood/Huntsville P-8 as this proposed SAP "sets the stage" for that to occur. By setting the stage, HCS will believe they can proceed without having to ask permission of the DOJ, which is exactly what they (Dr. Wardynski) desire. The superintendent that has more than once stated publicly that he wouldn't be closing schools, sure has done a lot of it. That was just one in a series of statements that Dr. Wardynski has made to parents that was reversed and denied at a later date. The superintendent wants things his way with no input from the outside and that includes the DOJ. Once again decisions that should be made with the best interests of the education of the student are instead being made with the best interests of unseen plans.

My second point of contention is the lack of affecting any meaningful change in terms of racial diversity. Utilizing enrollment numbers from the 2013-14 school year as reported to the Board of Education for the State of Alabama, (this is the only data accessible to the general public) finds that the new boundaries in the proposed SAP do very little in altering the racial composition of HCS. The only discernible differences are:

- A predominately African American elementary school will be included in the feeder pattern for Huntsville High School, hereinafter referred to as HHS
- A predominately Hispanic elementary school will be included in the feeder patter for GHS
- An indeterminate number of African American and ethnic minority students will be reassigned to HHS

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The feeder pattern changes at the elementary level will result in no impact as their diversity is diluted in the predominately white middle schools they feed. The SAP contains no near term plans to alter the racial diversity of GHS. Returning to the 2013-14 school year enrollment data, the composition of the GHS student body was:

White	1,275	73.74%
African American	237	13.71%
Asian	75	4.34%
Hispanic	99	5.73%
Multi-Race	43	2.49%

**Table 1 Grissom High School enrollment for 2013-14**

The lack of any meaningful change in racial composition and the amendments to the consent order fosters the belief among many of a demonstrated bias in the treatment of GHS. That evidence of bias in HCS is why Huntsville will continue to operate two school systems, one black and one white. The HCS effort to remedy their legal requirements falls short, as the SAP contains no significant redistricting effort in the south or east Huntsville areas which are predominantly White. HCS has failed to produce a plan that is in the best interest of the students and community.

My third point of disputation with the proposed SAP centers on changes to the existing southern boundary between HHS, and GHS. The areas in question encompass the Westbury/ Fleming Meadows neighborhood east of Memorial Parkway and south of Airport Road and the Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills neighborhood bounded to the east by Whitesburg drive and to the north by Carl T. Jones Drive. The boundary lines were redrawn, moving students in Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills attending GHS to HHS and students in Westbury/Fleming Meadows attending HHS to GHS. What was the motivation for making this change? Was it simply changed for the sake of change?

Using 2010 census data, the count was we tabulated for each census tract in the affected areas. The census data used in the analysis was composed of Block Groups, the smallest statistical division of a census tract. Each Block Group is composed of a cluster of blocks, where each block is formed by streets, roads, streams, and other visible physical and cultural features. Utilizing census maps, the blocks and block groups that lay within the boundary lines depicted in Attachment A of the consent order were identified and tabulated.

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After adjusting the population count for children's ages in 2015, it was determined that approximately 104 children resided in the Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills neighborhood and 64 children resided in the Westbury/Fleming Meadows neighborhood. Further decomposition and analysis was performed to determine if this change was in the interest of racial diversity. The breakdown ethnic distribution is as follows:

White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	90	86.5%
Black or African American alone	3	2.88%
Asian alone	6	5.77%
Two or more races	1	0.96%
Hispanic or Latino	4	3.85%

**Table 2 High School age children in the Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills neighborhood**

White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	49	76.56%
Black or African American alone	4	6.25%
Asian alone	2	3.13%
Native Hawaiian and other pacific islander alone	2	3.13%
Some other race alone	3	4.69%
Hispanic or Latino	4	6.25%

**Table 3 High School age children in the Westbury/Fleming Meadows neighborhood**

Statistically, there exist no appreciable differences in these populations, at least nothing that would alter the racial diversity of either school.

Looking for any explanation other than change for the sake of change, the census data was further analyzed. The obvious demographic measures that could differentiate the affected areas were economic by nature, median household income and median home value. Returning to the 2010 census data, tallying the median household income in the past 12 months (in 2013 inflation-adjusted dollars) and the median home value in the 3 census tracts within affected Grissom zoned area. The breakdown is as follows:

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	BG 1, Census Tract 19.02	BG 1, Census Tract 19.03	BG 2, Census Tract 27.22
Median household income	\$85,163.00,	\$112,688.00	\$114,167.00
Median home value	\$251,300.00	\$363,500.00	\$400,000.00

**Table 4 Median income and home value for the Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills neighborhood**

The median household income and median home value was tallied for the affected Huntsville zoned census tracts. The breakdown is as follows:

	BG 2, Census Tract 26	BG 3, Census Tract 26
Median household income	\$59,234.00	\$46,250.00
Median home	\$219,700.00	\$168,100.00.

**Table 5 Median income and home value for the Westbury/Fleming Meadows neighborhood**

The only conclusion drawn from this information was that the level of affluence in the Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills area that is presently zoned for GHS is the higher of the two.

There does not seem to be an answer for why the boundary changed that anyone involved in negotiating the compromise is willing to share. An article in the February 20, 2015 edition of the Huntsville Times coverage of the Board of Education vote, an unidentified member of the board posed a similar question to their counsel. "Is there a wash between Huntsville and Grissom swapped neighborhoods, Westbury and Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills?" In his response, Mr. Brooks stated "if you open the gates to grandfathering in for select neighborhoods, it would create a demand from neighborhoods all over the city. You cannot just take a particular area and be fair." Note that the response of Mr. Brooks never addressed why the neighborhoods were swapped, particularly when there was no statistical differences.

Having attended the public forum on February 3, 2015 at HHS, I witnessed parents of children in the Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills voice their displeasure with the zone swap with Westbury. A few recalled, Dr. Wardynski's assurances at a public meeting on January 14, 2013 that he was not rezoning Grissom despite the fact that there were changes to the Grissom zoning in initial SAP. Parents from Westbury and Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills called for the swap to be eliminated from the plan. At least six of the parents pleaded with the board to extend the grandfather clause to allow students from more grades to remain at their current high school or

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high school tract if the swap could not be eliminated. Their willingness to compromise was apparently ignored.

The impact of this swap on my personal situation leaves me very upset. Westbury was my choice for a home. Having graduated from HHS 38 years ago, my experiences at HHS motivated me to provide my children with the same experience. Two of my children have graduated from HHS, one is currently enrolled in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade there and the youngest attends Whitesburg P-8. The zoning swap will leave my plans unrealized. The reality of the situation is that my freshman will be pulled from HHS and sent to GHS where he will attend one, possibly two years, in an overcapacity facility. In the fall of 2016, assuming their aggressive schedule can be met, he will move again, this time to the new campus. After all is done, he will have moved three times in a three to four year span. The idea of moving any student before a new facility is opened demonstrates no consideration on limiting the impact on a child due regardless of zoning. This should come as no surprise when a superintendent who implements changes with unrealistic timelines is an everyday occurrence.

The Huntsville/Grissom boundary change also impacts students at Whitesburg P-8. The existing boundary flowed students entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade from Whitesburg between the two high schools. Whether one agrees with the “education ideal” to keep children with their classmates from elementary to high school, there is a benefit in splitting a school zone to feed into the next level. A split zone that divides the population into large enough pools ensures that students continue to the next level with some familiar faces.

The transition to high school is the first of many “forks in the road” that our children will face in their lives. Kids can have a hard time breaking into an already established group, but shaking things up a bit in 9<sup>th</sup> grade can actually be beneficial. When many people are new rather than most people already in established groups, it can mean new opportunities for friendships, the breakup of some cliques, and new beginnings for those who were pigeonholed in a certain way in elementary and middle school. Yes, it might be devastating for some to leave their school friends of eight years, but it might actually be freeing for others who will rise to the challenge. High school is hard, but having a big pack of friends one has known since kindergarten there does not always make it easier.

The question here is why sacrifice benefits because they are not consistent with an operational model? The reason we send our children to school is to prepare them for life. As parents, we cannot adequately educate or socialize them alone. Racial and socioeconomic diversity are both good for our children to experience with school being the primary place of experience.



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The Huntsville/Grissom boundary change includes an additional impact on students at the middle school level. The SAP in the proposed consent order reassigns children in the Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills areas east of Whitesburg Drive, north of Four Mile Post Road and bounded to the northeast by Carl T. Jones Drive to Huntsville Middle School. These children are currently zoned for the Whitesburg P-8 school zone. The reassignment increases the distance these students will travel daily. A random address was selected near the northwest boundary of the area east of Whitesburg Drive (723 Tannahill Drive) and used Google driving directions to approximate the distance. For the record, an individual can see Whitesburg P-8 from the hilltop vantage point on the southern end of Tannahill Drive.

- 723 Tannahill Drive to Whitesburg P-8 (Sanders Road) is approximately 1.3 miles with a drive time of 5 minutes via Whitesburg Dr S and Tannahill Dr SE
- 723 Tannahill Drive to Huntsville Middle School (Adams Street) is approximately 3.5 miles with a drive time of 10 minutes via Whitesburg Dr S

The parents of the children who live deeper in Jones Valley/Huntsville Hills can expect a larger travel distance. Again, we selected a random address near the southeastern boundary and used Google driving directions to approximate the distance.

- Old Carriage Lane to Huntsville Middle School (Adams Street) is approximately 5.8 mile commute with a drive time of 12-15 minutes via Whitesburg Dr S and Carl T. Jones Drive.
- Old Carriage Lane to Whitesburg P-8 (Sanders Road) is approximately a 2.6 mile commute with a drive time of 7 minutes via 4 Mile Post Road.

The only accomplishment by HCS is to increase the transportation cost parents bear. This is not the first HCS decision that ultimately increased parental costs. HCS will be quick to counter that they provide bus service for K-8 children who live more than 2 miles from their school. Because of the wide area these busses cover, some children face up to 1 hour each way on the bus daily. Not all children are capable of enduring extended bus rides (i.e. motion sickness).

A final impact associated with the proposed SAP and Whitesburg P-8 is a traffic problem. When it was initially announced that McDonnell Elementary was being closed and its students were rezoned to Whitesburg P-8, members of the Westbury/Fleming Meadows civic association spoke with Mr. Scott Gillies at one of the public forums. Mr. Gillies, the Director of Transportation at HCS was informed of a possible traffic situation. The traffic issue centers on the increased traffic through the neighborhood created by automobiles traveling from the west side of Memorial Parkway. The shortest distance between McDonnell and Whitesburg P-8 is to enter Queensbury drive from Airport Road and proceed through the neighborhood down Chadwell Road, reaching Sanders Road at the rear of Whitesburg P-8. Mr. Gillies assured everyone that busses would not

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enter the neighborhood except for those picking up and dropping off. He failed to understand that our worry was with private vehicles transporting children. Within the last month, the civic association has learned that Chadwell Road was a topic at a recent Huntsville Planning Commission meeting. The commission discussed a projected increase, up to an additional 325 vehicles a day, on the residential road and the possibility of gating Sanders Road where it intersects with Chadwell to prevent traffic from and through the neighborhood accessing Whitesburg P-8. Once again, a decision was made, this time traffic patterns, without taking any advisement from those who know the area. The outcome is not clear, but be assured that residents of Westbury/Fleming Meadows will ultimately pay for the mistakes of HCS.

The compromise also includes page after page of guidelines and regulations and promises, such as providing more advanced courses in some schools and offering prekindergarten in all schools and better using the magnet programs to lure students north and opening new magnet programs. There are a myriad of issues that exist among the many pages that cannot be sufficiently addressed in this letter. I will attempt to highlight a few below.

1. Every page is full of promises that lack timelines.

The superintendent has historically made decisions with unrealistic timelines and acted before anyone knew what was happening. Based on the few target dates mentioned, we can expect the rollout of programs before they are ready. The implementation of the digital 1:1 is an example of making a decision without a realistic timeline and the problems it created. It only took three years to get enough bandwidth and Wi-Fi capabilities to accommodate all the users. In a city full of engineers, someone would have spotted the flaw in his plan had it been shared publically.

2. Many of the promised changes are vaguely written, giving the superintendent a great deal of leeway for interpretation.

Given the superintendents record on following through on promises, can we afford to allow him free reign over implementation?

3. The goal that each high school will have no fewer than 12 A.P./IB classes and no fewer than eight honors classes by 2016-17.

This is only meaningful if the district doesn't lower minimum requirements. It is believed by many in the community that this was done previously but no hard proof is yet to surface.

4. The goal of math acceleration is to prepare all students to take A.P. and IB diploma courses by 12th grade.

If the goal is to have everyone in an A.P. class, then there is no need for "normal level" classes. At that point A.P. classes become the norm and the A.P. moniker is no longer



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meaningful. My eldest child graduated with the “advanced” diploma, but she never saw any benefit from the little sticker attached to her diploma in terms of university admission or scholarships. While on the topic of math, children in the HCS are getting short-changed in mathematics education. Every evening a child enters answers to math problems electronically and is not required to show their work. Having a degree in mathematics I am well aware that showing your work is fundamental in understanding mathematics.

5. The district plans to increase A.P. enrollment at schools with low A.P. participation by offering financial incentives to attract A.P. qualified teachers to the schools.

HCS can have all the A.P. qualified teachers needed but it will not mean anything if students are not willing to sign up for A.P. classes. To raise the enrollment, the student qualifications will be lowered. One of my children signed up for the A.P. math class in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. His performance in English, History and Science from the previous year was not at the level to consider him for A. P. in those subjects. Two days after the school year started, he came home with a new schedule, with ALL A. P. classes. In a meeting with the principal to ask that he be withdrawn from the A. P. classes, it became apparent that he was intentionally placed the A. P. classes to help the school meet its target goal.

6. Schools can offer comparable performing arts programs but cannot offer programs that are unique to magnet schools, thus making Lee High School's performing arts program more attractive to the district.

This can only happen by reducing what is offered at some of the schools. The GHS dance and performing arts programs are already comparable if not exceeding the quality of the offerings at Lee High. My opinion is purely subjective, based observations.

7. Why no magnet schools in South Huntsville?

The programs at HHS and Jones Valley or Blossomwood elementary schools already attract transfers from minority students. The number of minority transfers is limited due to capacity; hence there is no meaningful impact on racial diversity. If there had been some forethought in the construction of the new Grissom High, additional capacity to host a magnet program attractive to minority students could have swayed some opinions.

In conclusion, the question remains “How does Huntsville achieve a reasonable racial balance in the public schools?” Most of the schools in Huntsville, as elsewhere in the country, are socioeconomically isolated—either uniformly upper middle class or uniformly poor. That’s no surprise as most neighborhoods in Huntsville are highly segregated, too, and the schools reflect this unfortunate fact. People send their children to schools based on their economic ability.

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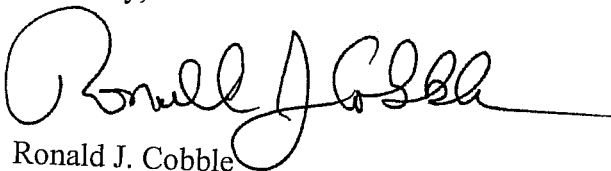
Changing the makeup of any neighborhood would require intervention by a governing entity. Left to the free market, developers and builders are interested in attracting affluence and realtors are going to market in areas that promise larger commissions. This is likely the driving force behind the exodus from north to south that started over 40 years ago and continues today.

Forced busing or building low income public housing adjacent to middle class and affluent areas is not the answer. The people in power and with money will not allow that to happen. Maybe "controlled choice" schools, zoning that eliminates a "property right" to the school closest to one's home could offer a solution. The school system of San Francisco is widely held as the best example of controlled choice schools.

If asked to offer ideas that may lead to an equitable resolution, I would suggest that HCS slow down and focus on improving the quality of all schools before addressing boundaries. The district is signing up for many improvements in the compromise without acknowledging it takes time to implement these changes. Change does not come overnight and the sooner HCS comes to realize that, the better off children and parents will be. Focusing resources to genuinely improve minority schools makes sense. That improvement should not be measured by test scores; it is much easier to teach a child to pass a test than teach a child to be successful. As one of the highest educated communities in the region, an oversight committee composed of individuals with no political aspirations or connections should be able to provide an unfettered assessment of improvement. We need to stop wasting money on lawyers and consultants and put that money where it is needed, in the classroom.

Judge Haikala, your position is not enviable; as an involved parent, it was necessary that I make every effort for my voice to be heard. Your willingness to accept input from the general public is greatly appreciated by all. My peers rest assured that your decision will be guided by common sense, reason and the laws of our land.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ronald J. Cobble". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Ronald J. Cobble